

Football FA Cup: Reading 0 Manchester United 3

Big freeze fails to cool United's fire

David Lacey

THOSE scanning the icy wastes of the weekend's football programme for historical precedents will no doubt have noticed that when the FA Cup was severely disrupted in 1963 the trophy was eventually won by Manchester United.

Others, more intent on debunking history, may feel entitled to point out that in the season which has seen the fewest postponements since the second world war, 1947-48, the Cup was won by... guess who?

Either way Old Trafford has now reached a point roughly similar to that at which Ron Atkinson went out and Alex Ferguson came in. Once more the Cup represents the only tangible alternative to the league championship, hopes for which are fading fast.

Under Ferguson Manchester United may have won two league titles, as well as the Double, but it is a common law of football that the more a manager wins the more he is expected to win. A third FA Cup success for Ferguson would be a considerable feat in a season of transition, but for United a place in the Cup Winners' Cup will never be an adequate substitute for one in the Champions' League.

As a builder of confidence and character, however, the FA Cup is invaluable, and should United make

their third successive appearance in the final this season Ferguson will regard it as an important staging post in the inevitable process of turning the team around. Last August, with Cantona suspended and Ince and Hughes sold on, few would have given much for United's chances of winning something.

Of course, the FA Cup could still prove United's Calvary this season, as it nearly did in the third round against Sunderland, who led at Old Trafford and Roker Park. Last weekend, however, less was left to chance.

Playing with more aplomb than hitherto, United continued their tour of the Endsleigh League's pre-Taylor museums with a 3-0 win at Reading which was never seriously in doubt once Giggs had snapped up a rebound nine minutes before half-time. A mislit centre from Parker, his first goal for three years, inadvertently increased their lead, and Cantona added a third in the penultimate minute.

Reading, guided by their 36-year-old player-manager Jimmy Quinn and Mick Gooding, worried United with inventive, imaginative football until Giggs scored.

The match was marred by an incident in which a coin thrown by a fan hit a linesman. If the Football Association feels inclined to rap Reading over the knuckles for the incident it should also commend the Elm Park groundstaff's efforts in getting the



Star cluster: congratulations overflow for substitute Paul Parker (left) after scoring his first goal for three years and United's second in the cup tie at Elm Park

tie played at all. A mixture of sand and plastic sheeting had defeated the frost, and the only problem for the players was an uneven surface.

Ferguson told United to "be sensible, keep it simple and keep the ball ahead of you". He might have added, "If in doubt, watch what the opposition are doing", since common sense and simplicity were fundamental to Reading's early optimism, when a luckier rebound here and better contact there might at least have made the game more of a contest.

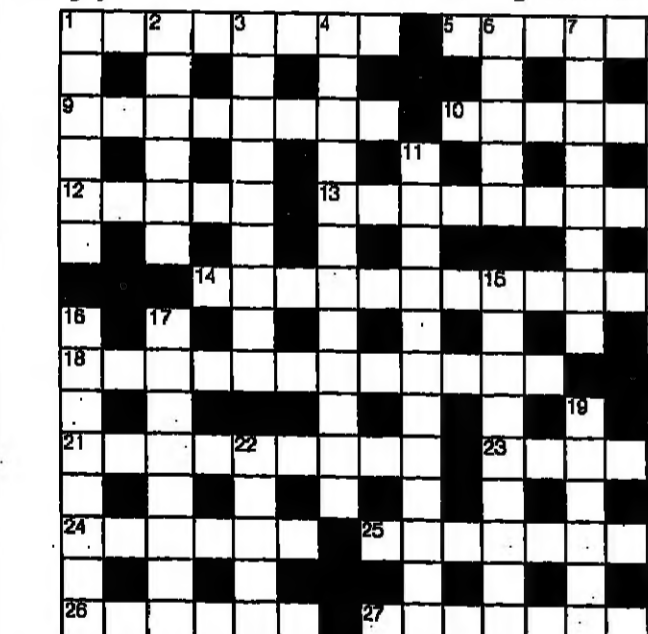
In the end the principal difference between the teams lay not so much in technique as in pace. "United have got so many good athletes," said Quinn afterwards.

"The most dangerous moments for us came when our movements broke down in their box. Keane, Butt, Sharpe and Giggs could get the ball up the other end in a matter of seconds. And that French fellow wasn't bad either."

Though Reading reproduced their angles of pass and runs into space that had twice brought Sunderland

within sight of a famous Cup victory, they did not have the change of gear which would have caused Bruce more problems. The Manchester United captain was solidly personified at Elm Park, but he rarely tested for speed. "I said before the game that Rexing would win," Yuri Geller, El Park's resident celebrity, told Rex Giggs, "but your talent overpowered my mind." Giggs looked blank at best a hasty retreat before Geller could get on to the subject of being free-kicks.

Cryptic crossword by Shed



- Across**
- 1 Co-habitant's unqualified victory in chess (5)
 - 5 Drive away, putting back records in cover (8)
 - 9, 20 Firm smoocher-out of fold by 6, 10 (sic) (8, 8)
 - 10 It's by no means obligatory to turn on 26 (6)
 - 12 Holy man took action about sportmen (5)
 - 13 The heavy smoker starts inhaling joints without satisfaction (9)
 - 14 Rashly losing second precious stone in the balance (12)
 - 18 In contact with the audience for 10n (5-2-5)
 - 21 Makes a new beginning, keeping dead birds (9)
 - 23 Main character born to get the bird (5)
 - 24 Storm about gold in plenty (9)
 - 25 Being put in the picture regarding measurement (8)
 - 26 Setback involving aficionado of lads (6)
 - 27 One willing to let fool take part (8)
- Down**
- 1 Stand up to welcoming notice by 10 (5)

American Football Superbowl XXX

Brown leads the stampede

DEFENSIVE back Larry Brown provided the inspiration as Dallas Cowboys beat Pittsburgh Steelers 27-17 in Tempe, Arizona to clinch their third Super Bowl in four years. Brown was named the game's Most Valuable Player after making two key interceptions for the National Football Conference champions.

He found himself in the right place at the right time as the Pittsburgh quarterback Neil O'Donnell, under pressure, threw the ball right to the Dallas cornerback, killing the Steelers' threat of pulling off a comeback.

The Cowboys joined the San Francisco 49ers as the only clubs to win five Super Bowls and extended the NFC winning streak in the National Football League's championship game to 12 consecutive years. "It wasn't the prettiest game we've played, but our defence stepped up and made the big plays," said Dallas quarterback Troy Aikman.

The Cowboys' much-maligned coach Barry Switzer, under intense scrutiny for two years, was obviously elated and clearly feeling vindicated. After accepting the Vince Lombardi trophy, Switzer turned to Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones and screamed: "Are we having fun yet? We did it our way baby. We did it, we did it, we did it!"

"This one is sweet, they all are," said Cowboys star running back Emmitt Smith, who was held to just 49 yards rushing but scored touchdowns after each of Brown's interceptions. The experts were predicting another Super Bowl blow-out, but after four consecutive lopsided clashes, the Steelers made this one exciting. Pittsburgh, though trailing throughout, had seized the momentum and were very much alive until late in the fourth quarter. They even looked as if they might win until Brown's second interception put the final nail in the coffin. "Each week a different guy made the big plays. It's not surprising today it was Larry Brown. He bailed out my offence," said Aikman, who needed just two plays to score after each of Brown's pick-offs. "After winning three Super Bowls in four years this football team has made a place in history," added the player who completed 15 of 23 passes for 209 yards and one touchdown. The Steelers came alive late in the first half and had the edge in virtually every statistic except for turnovers. "And that was what killed them — two interceptions by a quarterback known for accurate passes." — *Reuter*

Clinton called to testify in Arkansas trial

Jonathan Freedland in Washington

THE Whitewater affair reached new heights this week when a federal judge ordered President Bill Clinton to testify in a criminal trial investigating the scandal. Mr Clinton was issued with a subpoena demanding he appear as the star witness in the trial of Susan McDougal, once his partner in the failed Arkansas land deal known as Whitewater.

If he complies, Mr Clinton will become the first sitting president to appear in criminal proceedings. White House aides were swift to emphasise on Monday that the president has not been charged with anything and has been called merely as a witness for Ms McDougal, who faces conspiracy and fraud charges. But the political cost for Mr Clinton is likely to be high, coming less than 10 days after his wife, Hillary Clinton, faced a four-hour grilling before the Whitewater grand jury in Washington. Republicans are bound to seize on the image of a president forced to return to his home state to answer questions about the shady financial dealings that appear to have been rife when he was governor.

The trial is due to start in Little Rock on March 4 — in the middle of the Republican primary season, when the party chooses a presidential challenger to take on Mr Clinton in November. Mr Clinton will reportedly seek to repeat Ronald Reagan's action during the Iran-Contra trial of the former national security adviser John Poindexter. Mr Reagan delivered a sworn deposition on video.

Right on in Dixieland, page 6

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The Guardian Weekly



Bomb aftermath... Dazed workers flee the scene of the Colombo blast in which 80 people died

Tigers take revenge on Colombo

Suzanne Goldenberg

SRI LANKA paid in blood for its victories over the Tamil Tiger guerrillas as a devastating truck bomb tore through central Colombo last week, killing up to 80 people and injuring about 1,300 others.

Two Tamil youths reportedly confessed to helping the suicide bombers. The men, identified as Ranganathan and Kutti, were arrested as they fled the scene of one of the most devastating explosions in more than 12 years of a war which has made a speciality of terror.

They told detectives they were members of the Tamil Tigers, the guerrilla force suspected of carrying out the attack.

The Sri Lankan authorities had been expecting an attack on civilian targets in Colombo for more than a month, ever since the army inflicted its most serious defeat yet on the Tigers by ejecting them from their citadel in the northern Jaffna peninsula. President Chandrika Kumaratunga said the bomb showed the rebels' desperation following their defeat. "This unfortunate incident has once again reminded us that the threat to Sri Lankan society by terrorism must be firmly dealt with," she said.

The blast is bound to bring further ruin to a country which has seen its economic fortunes plummet with the war. There were fears that the latest sign of the Tigers' deadly terror might scare away visitors. The forthcoming cricket World Cup has been thrown into chaos as Australia and West Indies seem set on refusing to play matches in Colombo (*story, page 32*).

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Africa's poorest trapped in war of mindless mutilation

Rebels and state troops butcher civilians rather than fight each other, reports Mark Huband from Bo in Sierra Leone

FRANCIS Momoh Sao stroked his cheek with his swollen stump of a hand. "It is everlasting punishment," he said. "The people came after midnight. One of the men ordered a boy of around 13 to chop me with a cutlass and he chopped off all my fingers. I can't do anything for myself now, even eat."

Mr Sao, aged 32, now lives with other displaced people near the central Sierra Leonean town of Bo, 150 miles east of the capital, Freetown. He seems obsessed with his hand, staring at it and trying to use it as if he had fingers. "Savagery has been dressed up as revolution by the rebels, the Revolutionary United Front. But the country's corrupt and inept army has done much the same, and civilians are convinced that the 'men in uniform' who commit these acts could

just as easily be government troops as rebels. While everyone gossips about the coup last month, in which military ruler Captain Valentine Strasser was ousted by his deputy, no one seems to know if it is a good or a bad thing. What is certain is that the war, which has brought in four foreign armies, has united government soldiers, mercenaries, diamond dealers and gold prospectors in turning misery into profit and poverty into power.

Michael Sumaila is 27 years old and strong. His baby sister holds his knee tight where he sits on a wooden stool as he tells his story at his camp near Bo. "It was at Pelewan where the rebels caught me. They told me to lie on the road and say they were going to cut my arms off. I never asked why. I just begged them seriously not to do it, but they told me they had to cut them. They refused my begging. The man with the machete came and he was instructed to cut my arms off. "He cut the right arm twice and the left arm twice. I couldn't get up, and some other rebels came in and cut my back with a bayonet. Later my brother found me and brought me to the hospital."

Perhaps, but only perhaps, he is lucky to be alive. Barbarism has claimed at least 50,000 lives since 1991. Both "armies" run away when the shooting starts, preferring to maim defenceless civilians who can easily be accused of complicity with the opposing sides. Sierra Leone is Africa's poorest country, but its mineral deposits mean it should be one of the richest. Nobody can explain why the war is happening. Ceasefires, like the one called last month, are only to allow rearmament. The rebels have no reasonable ideological goal.

In Freetown, the search for normality has thrown up the strangest rituals. In the dim light of a crescent moon, on a terrace at the dilapidated Paramount Hotel, the Freemasons of the Lodge Sapientis wore black ties and toasted success as if there were no war. Outside, a million candles burned along roadsides where nobody can remember having electricity. The Freemasons ended with "Auld Lang Syne". The war may as well have been 1,000 miles away, though the nearest victims are only a one-hour drive from the capital along roads which, when they are open, provide the only link between the self-styled grandees of Freetown and the peasants who scrape a living in what Sierra Leoneans pompously term "the provinces". The violence began in March 1991 when the rebels' campaign was launched from Liberia by a British-trained army corporal, Foday Sankoh. The corrupt president, Major-General Joseph Momoh, preferred to steal rather than fight the rebels, and his duplicity resulted in the 1992 coup which installed Strasser, then aged 26. Last month, it was Strasser's turn to be ousted. The leader, who had promised the army's withdrawal from politics in the presidential election on February 26, then tried to sneak into the contest as a candidate. But, instead of running for president, Africa's youngest head of state found himself ingloriously replaced by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, who has professed commitment to civilian rule. Within hours of the coup, the rebels declared a seven-day ceasefire. Kono, 300 miles east of Freetown, produces up to \$5 million worth of top quality diamonds every week. Production, possession and protection of that wealth determines the course of Sierra Leonean politics. Army rule has enriched the



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Austria	AS30	Malta	45c
Belgium	BF75	Netherlands	G 4.75
Denmark	DK16	Norway	NK 16
Finland	FM 10	Portugal	E300
France	FF 13	Saudi Arabia	SR 6.00
Germany	DM 4	Spain	P 300
Greece	DR 400	Sweden	SK 16
Italy	L 3.000	Switzerland	SF 3.30

The Week

ANTONIO MACCANICO, a 71-year-old former bureaucrat, has been asked to form a broadly-based government in Italy with a brief to keep the country ticking over while politicians try to agree on reforming the constitution.

THE United States has given a grant of \$2 million in humanitarian assistance to communist North Korea which, according to the Clinton administration, is experiencing widespread food shortages and malnutrition.

RUSSIAN union leaders called off their pit strike at the weekend after the government promised \$125 million in back pay and a \$2.25 billion subsidy for the industry. Washington Post, page 13

CONFUSION reigned in Guatemala after the government said a man was shot dead as he tried to kill President Alvaro Arzu on the eve of Pope John Paul's visit.

THE GREEK government, facing public indignation at Washington's role in defusing the row with Turkey over a disputed Aegean island, forced the US assistant secretary of state, Richard Holbrooke, to cancel his forthcoming visit. La Monde, page 17

CLAUDE GUBLER, the Paris doctor who breached state secrecy by writing a book about President François Mitterrand's health record, may be struck off by the French Medical Association.

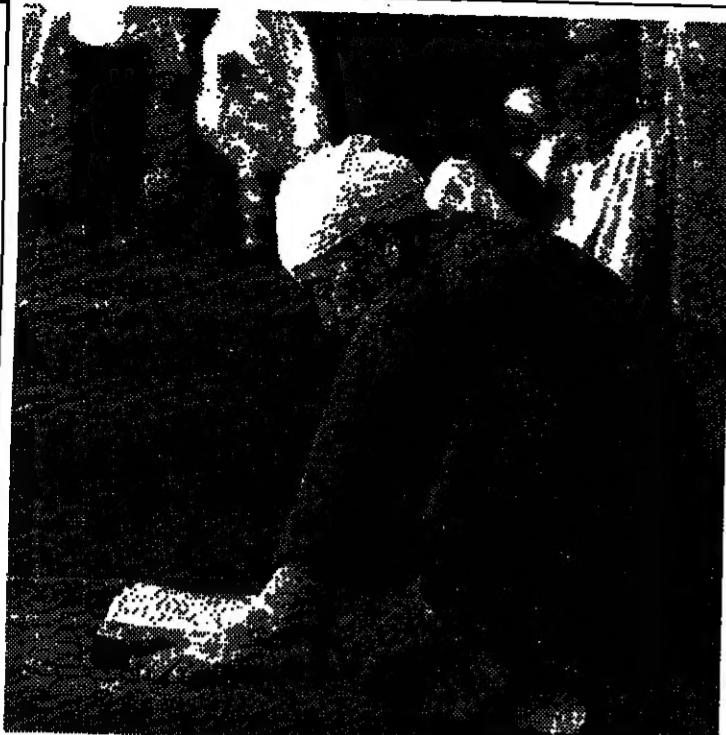
TAIJK government troops pushed back a mutinous army force that had advanced towards the capital, Dushanbe, to press demands for the dismissal of the government of the central Asian former Soviet republic.

SHOPS and markets in the Guinean capital Conakry were bare on Sunday after a frenzy of looting by mutinous soldiers demanding better pay and rations. Up to 40 people were killed and dozens wounded in the looting and clashes between the mutineers and troops.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL said it received many reports in the last 10 months of German police beating up detained foreigners, and demanded an investigation.

NIGERIAN and Cameroonian troops fought on disputed islands in the Bakassi peninsula and several soldiers were killed on both sides.

THE United Nations secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, warned that an unprecedented cash crisis could shut down the organisation. Washington Post, page 13



Words of wisdom... A man studies the Koran in the 1,000-year-old Azhar mosque in Cairo before breaking his fast at sunset during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. PHOTOGRAPH: MOHAMED EL-DAN/HANNAH

Kohl warns Britain on Europe's future

John Palmer in Brussels Larry Elliott in Davos and Michael White

CHANCELLOR Helmut Kohl issued a veiled warning to the British government last week that it should not try to deflect other European Union countries from moving ahead to monetary and closer political union.

His remarks will be seen as a direct rebuke to senior British figures, including the former Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, who have asked Germany to propose postponing the planned move to a single currency in 1999.

In an address at Louvain University near Brussels, the German chancellor served notice that the pace of European integration would not be set by those who wanted to slow progress to closer union.

Mr Kohl said the single currency project was going through "a period of uncertainty" but he insisted that "the policy of European integration actually comes down to a question of peace or war for the 21st century". He stressed that "it is no use following the ostrich policy."

The chancellor did not mention the British government by name, but it was clear whom he had in mind. "During the next few years we will have to prove that a viable Europe can be built with 15 and more states," he said. "The slowest ship in the convoy should not be allowed to determine its speed. If individual partners are not prepared or able to participate in certain steps towards integration, the others should not be denied the opportunity to move forward."

At the weekend, Jacques Santer, president of the European Commission, upped the stakes by bracketing the single market with the achievement of monetary union by 1999. "We will spare no effort to see that it is achieved. But if it isn't, it will be a great step backwards, and I don't know whether the single market would suffer such a blow."

Sir Leon Britan, the EC vice-president, strove on Sunday to

defuse the increasingly fraught single currency debate when he rejected Mr Santer's claims that the failure of monetary union could threaten the survival of the single market.

After a weekend in which the risks of postponing or abandoning monetary union have been one of the main talking points at the World Economic Forum, Sir Leon said Brussels had always viewed the single market and the single currency as separate entities. "Those countries who don't participate in the single currency, either because they don't qualify or choose to use their opt-out, are fully entitled to the benefits of the single market," he added.

Amid jitters over Mr Kohl's warning, repeated in Munich at the weekend, the British Defence Secretary, Michael Portillo, said in Davos that the nation state — as opposed to nationalism — still had "a very important" part to play. "Nation states and nationalism are not the same thing. And what we're looking for is the way in which nations can collaborate together more and more," he said.

British ministers are increasingly confident that the Euro-acceptance adopted by the British Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, will help them weather the forthcoming Maastricht review without a split. Mr Portillo also rejected Mr Kohl's suggestion that Britain was "the slowest boat" in Europe.

So did Mr Rifkind. But Britain's EU allies remain suspicious. Mr Santer's theme was taken up by Jean-Luc Dehaene, the Belgian prime minister.

"If you don't maintain that integration process, you will have the reverse — disintegration", Mr Dehaene said. "Without monetary union even the single market would not hold," he added.

The interventions of both Mr Santer and Mr Dehaene were seen as evidence of concern that the Maastricht timetable will be deferred until 2002 to allow more countries to meet the convergence criteria.

SA school in court for barring blacks

David Barstford in Johannesburg

A PROVINCIAL government in South Africa is due to take a local primary school to court this week to force it to admit three black children under the country's non-racial constitution.

The Northern Province announced last week that it would be lodging an urgent application with the supreme court for an order forcing the all-white Potgietersrus primary school to open its door to blacks. The move came after parents of children at the school voted to defy the government on the issue.

"We want the court to rule that the school's action is unconstitutional and that they have to admit blacks," said a spokesman for the provincial administration, Jake Mokobi.

A confrontation between parents and the regional government blew up last month when a group of parents wearing the khaki dress of rightwing organisations blocked the school entrance to stop a father delivering his three children.

"God warns us in the Bible about mixing races," a local newspaper quoted a parent as saying. "Under no circumstances will my children mix with blacks."

But Danie Bisschoff, a lawyer representing the school, insisted that the black children were only refused admission because of a shortage of space. "The black kids are not the issue," he said. "The school couldn't allow white kids in either because there just isn't room."

But the government spokesman insisted there was room for the three black children. "It's a disguise for crude racism," he said.

The extra-parliamentary Conservative party, which is strong in the area, is attempting to exploit the clash. It described the incident as a "new awakening by Afrikaners" and appealing to whites elsewhere to "emulate the courage" of the Potgietersrus parents and "follow the same path of resistance".

Greece gets back piece of history

Helena Smith in Athens

GREECE is poised to renew its campaign to retrieve the Elgin Marbles after succeeding in getting a hoard of priceless Mycenaean treasures repatriated from the United States.

This small piece of Greek history arrived back at the weekend, after years of "blood curdling" adventure, according to Greece's new culture minister, Stavros Benos. "This is a major triumph, not only for Greece, but for all countries seeking the return of cultural property," he said.

Few Greeks have heard of the stolen Aloada Treasures, but their return from Washington is due to be marked this week. No pomp will be spared as the collection of rare and ancient gold jewellery and ornaments is welcomed in the capital.

Mr Benos, who has assumed the post most famously held by the late actress Melina Mercouri, will have "Elgin's loot" uppermost on his mind as he presides over the fanfare.

"The return of these wonderful pieces will most certainly strengthen our demand for the Parthenon marbles," Mr Benos said. "It shows that Melina's dream, which everyone thought utopian, can be realised. We will get the marbles back from the British Museum."

Mr Benos has none of Mercouri's fiery passion or glamour. But like his friend and predecessor, he has made the repatriation of the 75m-long, fifth century frieze, metopes and figures a personal "mission".

"The days of 'no, no, no' are over," said Eleni Cubitt of the London-based British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon marbles. "Even those who were opposed to their return now realise the arguments they used are no longer valid."

The repatriation of the Mycenaean treasures, which include ornate rings, necklaces, glass beads and sealstones, ends nearly two decades of thievary, crooked art deals and unprecedented legal action.

Birthplace of Buddhism's founder traced to Nepal

John Ezard

B UDDHISM'S counterpart to Christ's stable has been discovered in south-west Nepal, an international team of archaeologists announced on Monday.

They said a stone buried on a platform of bricks 5m under a temple marked the place where Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was born 2,600 years ago.

The team said the relics were under the Mayadevi temple in Lumbini, 300km south-west of Kathmandu. The platform dated from the era of Emperor Ashoka, who ruled much of the sub-continent.

The archaeologists — from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Japan — said they made the discovery nine months ago, but the government delayed making an announcement until

it had finished consulting experts.

Some scholars claim the Buddha was born in northern India. But the prime minister of Nepal, Sher Bahadur Deuba, said the identification was reliable. "The discovery proves that Lord Buddha was born at this sacred place."

Buddhist literature says the Buddha's mother, Queen Mahamaya, dreamt in 623BC that "a white elephant, beautiful as silver" entered her womb through her side. On her way to her parents' home, she passed through what was then the park of Lumbini. She went into labour, bathed in a sacred pond and walked 25 paces to give birth.

According to this account, Emperor Ashoka placed a stone on bricks at the birthplace, and a pillar which still stands.

Iraqis celebrate in advance of UN oil talks

David Hirst

IRAQIS were queuing in Baghdad last week desperate to sell hoarded dollars and buy dinars, as the national currency staged a spectacular rise and the cost of food plunged.

Bank employees said they were collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars every day. Their reserves of hard currency have never been as high since coffers started depleting under pressure from United Nations sanctions, imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Some people queued all day but were unable to exchange their dollars, as banks ran short of dinars.

For ordinary Iraqis, the turnaround is the most sustained and dramatic in the bleak era that began with the Gulf war.

The Iraqi currency's spectacular recovery began after Baghdad agreed to enter talks with the UN on selling limited amounts of oil to buy urgently needed food and medicines. The talks were to begin this week.

Under UN resolution 986, Baghdad is entitled to sell \$1 billion worth of oil every three months for buying food and medicine to be distributed to the people under UN supervision.

President Saddam Hussein had been considering this for some time, after arguing for years that supervised oil sales were an infringement of sovereignty.

When he solemnly announced the oil-for-food talks to the people — on January 20 — the effect was immediate. Celebratory gunfire echoed around Baghdad and, by the end of the day, the currency was rising. Instead of costing 2,620 dinars to buy \$1, it cost 2,000. By last week, the official rate was 800 and strengthening.

Last month, in the wake of the announcement, joyful people descended in such numbers on the Shorja souk, Baghdad's traditional food market, that traffic came to a standstill. Musicians struck up, and the crowds danced as women handed out pastries.

"Thank God," said an old man in tears. "We are going to eat again, and all will go back to what it was."

The value of the dinar is the chief yardstick of Iraq's fortunes. Before the Gulf war, one dinar fetched \$3.20. It is still far from that, but is now 300 per cent stronger than before President Saddam announced the talks. Prices of food and basic commodities, such as rice, vegetable oil and sugar, have fallen by up to 50 per cent. This is true bounty in a country where a civil servant's entire official salary buys 24 eggs.

The strategy of hope carries high risks for President Saddam. The negotiations will be fraught with political and technical difficulties and there is no guarantee that the UN deal will go through.

If agreement is reached, that will almost certainly strengthen the Iraqi leader in the short term. The celebrations proved that. But the longer term is different.

"I think the people will start demanding more and more, and the Americans will capitalise on this to wring more and more concessions from him," an Iraqi exile said. "In any case, it is hard for him not to accept now. Can you imagine the people's reaction if prices jumped again to where they were — and probably much higher still?"

Jailed Ogonis plead for help

Chris McGreal in Port Harcourt

NINETEEN Ogonis facing trial and the gallows for allegedly participating in the same murders for which Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other men were hanged in November have smuggled a letter out of prison pleading for the Commonwealth to secure their freedom.

The appeal, headed "SOS" and signed by all 19 men, is addressed to a Commonwealth ministerial delegation appointed to urge Nigeria's military regime to restore democracy and respect human rights.

"We are hereby calling on you all, through your offices and humaneness, come quickly to our aid and

save our lives — cause our freedom, for we have suffered a lot," says the letter, handwritten on a page torn from an exercise book.

The 19 Ogonis are held in harsh conditions at Port Harcourt prison. They are split between severely overcrowded cells, each with dozens of inmates. All sleep on the floor. They are let out for a few minutes each morning to wash from a bucket in a neighbouring field.

Family visits are allowed once a month, but are more frequent if bribes are paid. Payment is also expected for food. Malnourishment and disease are common among the prison population.

"We are grossly underfed coup-

led with the complete lack of medical care. As a result we are becoming malnourished and anaemic. These conditions have contributed to the death of one of us," the letter said. Clement Tuisima died last August from untreated diabetes, according to Amnesty International.

The mechanic, aged 40, was taken briefly to hospital and chained to the bed, but he was returned to prison where he died.

Lawyers say the men's best hope is that the regime will not risk further international condemnation and will put the trial on hold indefinitely.

Meanwhile, posters threatening the life of the exiled Nigerian Nobel literature prize winner, Wole Soyinka, have been plastered across Lagos two days after a government minister implicated him in bomb attacks.

The posters, signed by "committed patriots", denounce opponents of the country's military dictator, General Sani Abacha, including the National Liberation Council of Nigeria (Nalicon) led by Professor Soyinka.

The threats come amid rising paranoia within the regime since the recent death of Gen Abacha's son in a presidential plane crash, and bomb explosions in the northern cities of Kano and Kaduna.

The publisher of the Guardian, Nigeria's leading independent newspaper, has survived an attempt by gunmen to kill him, the paper said at the weekend. It said Alex Ibru was shot in his car in Lagos last week by unknown assailants.

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Brains and bravery of a boy wonder

At five Alexander Faludy was devouring Tolkien. Now, aged 12, he is taking an arts degree. And all this from a boy with severe dyslexia. Peter Kingston reports

A FEW weeks after his birth, the tiny infant who has now — aged 12 — become Britain's youngest arts degree student gave his parents a glimpse of his remarkable intelligence. Long before the books say that babies are supposed to, Alexander was laughing and smiling.

By his sixth birthday, Andrew and Tanya Faludy had no doubt they had an exceptional child. Alexander blew out the candles on his cake and rose to his feet. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began. "We are gathered together today, in this very house, by the grace of God, in prosperity, to celebrate my sixth birthday." Until a year ago, his parents' major problem was to convince schools of their son's remarkable gift, because Alexander's mental powers came at a price. He is severely dyslexic and has very poor physical co-ordination.

For him, conventional infant and primary schooling became increasingly traumatic. As he got older his difficulties with reading and writing

and his ineptitude at games attracted savage bullying. The book he has written with his mother, published in Britain last week, recounts her determination to find a viable education for her son, and his pain and frustration. The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from *A Little Edge Of Darkness*, subtitled *A Boy's Triumph Over Dyslexia*, is that teachers may well be aware of the condition, but many in mainstream schooling are not yet equipped or inclined to take it into account.

As a toddler, Alexander's awkwardness with toys and play equipment, which was to set him apart from other children at junior school, distressed his parents. Desperate to find something he might enjoy, Tanya one day bought some tapes of children's stories. That evening, Alexander listened to Thomas the Tank Engine and Tanya told of her "gripped amazement as Alexander started to recite — verbatim — for a whole hour the stories he had listened to earlier".

Soon Alexander was devouring Tolkien. "His response to *The Hobbit* when he was five was very moving and impressive," said Tanya. "Something quite exceptional was going on in his head." Indeed, his oral skill had already clinched Alexander a place at a sought-after pre-prep school near the family home in Portsmouth. But that was his last official academic success for



Pillars of strength: Alexander and his mother Tanya. PHOTO: MARC HILL

five years until he passed GCSE English Literature at the age of nine. Within days of his starting at the school, hints were being dropped, said Tanya, that he might be better off elsewhere.

Throughout pre-prep and the next stage, from 8 to 11, Alexander's clumsiness — his persistent inability to tie shoelaces, or hold a cup and saucer — and his agonising lack of progress with reading and writing condemned him to misery. "Class discussions weren't evaluated as part of work," Alexander said. "The only way I was evaluated was for my writing, but it used to take me a whole lesson just to read what I was meant to be copying down off the board."

At seven Alexander joined Mensa and his dyslexia was officially diagnosed. Through Fareham College, where Tanya teaches, he was entered for GCSE English literature and at nine achieved the youngest

pass. That same year at school, he was ranked 20th out of 22 in class for English. Two years later he passed the A level, having been granted dispensation to tape-record his answers. Now Alexander seems to have found a school flexible enough to allow his unique talent to flourish. Milton Abbey school, Dorset, specialises in teaching boys with learning difficulties.

He is now in the second year of an Open University arts foundation course. His own room is set up with television, video, radio and cassette player. The OU textbooks he gets on tape from the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

"It's a new and good experience for all of us," said his housemaster, Andrew Day. "But it's quite daunting to have a 12-year-old who waddles into your study and asks you what you think about *Faust*." Over the next four years, the school hopes that its methods of rebuilding the confidence of so many dyslexic boys will help Alexander. The plan is that he will have graduated by the time he leaves and then go on to university at the usual age to do a second degree.

Tough as his experience has been, Alexander has been lucky to have parents committed and resourceful enough to see him through to an opportunity which is beyond many dyslexic children. How many, one wonders, are defeated by an education system that is not yet geared up for them.

A Little Edge Of Darkness - A Boy's Triumph Over Dyslexia, by Tanya and Alexander Faludy, is published by Jessica Kingsley, tel: (+44) 171-833 2307, price £9.95

GUARDIAN WEEKLY February 11 1996

CAN HE TALK SENSE BUT NOT 'GET IT' ON PAPER? DYSLEXIA

DYSLEXIC CHILDREN - THE SIGNS

- Usually: Indications that the child is lazy or "late developer"
- Often: Slow reading so that they seem to be lost
- Sometimes: reversed, rotated or twisted letters when writing
- Sometimes: clumsiness, left-handedness, difficulty in telling left from right.
- Sometimes: a family history of learning difficulties
- Sometimes: difficulty in learning lists and tables in the right order
- ALWAYS: A widening discrepancy between the child's intelligence and his performance in reading or spelling using traditional methods of teaching.

FROM THIS: All heads of yests
This wavy half of goods, some
very short as their are heads
each about three chess,
of rinky and goods, wavy
goods. This both are work.

TO THIS: Long sighted means
that things in the
distance are clear and
near things are fuzzy.
The light focus beyond
the retina to cover this
clear glasses must be
convex lenses.

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